

# Deborah Sokolove: What does the Voice of God Sound Like?

A Sermon for Seekers Church

January 19, 1997

by Deborah Sokolove

## What does the Voice of God Sound Like?

One snowy Wednesday last year, the guest preacher for Chapel at the Seminary didn't arrive, so Bobby McClain – who teaches preaching – was asked to fill in at the last minute. He began by saying, “A Christian should always be ready to do three things: pray, preach, and die.” One of the perils of our “open pulpit” here at Seekers is that sometimes Celebration Circle finds itself with an empty slot in the preaching calendar. This was one of those weeks, so last Sunday evening I found myself agreeing to preach again today.

As I explained to the preaching class last Tuesday, usually when I sign up to preach, I have something in particular that I feel is important to say. This time, however, it was more my sense of responsibility to this community than any particular “Word” that I wanted to bring, so I carefully considered the lectionary, praying that one of the texts would present something new, or at least something interesting. The lections, as you have just heard, are generally about call, and by Tuesday morning, my mind was still following the same old, tired, ruts.

One of the benefits – or dangers – of my job is the presence of the Cokesbury bookstore just a few steps away from my

office. That morning, as I wandered past the discount rack in the hallway, I saw a book with a handwritten note taped to the outside. The note said, "Due to my clumsy mistake – this book has been damaged! However, it is free for anyone willing to actually read it. Thank you" and was signed by one of the bookstore employees. I picked it up, and saw that it had a brownish stain, as though coffee had spilled on it, but it was otherwise perfectly legible. It was *The Parable of Ten Preachers*, by Thomas Troeger.

Tom is a fairly well known person in liturgical music circles, and an occasional contributor to an e-mail list I subscribe to. I had read one of his other books, called *Trouble at the Table*, which discusses the pitfalls and possibilities of music in worship, and been both impressed and amused. So, promising to give this book a good home, I took it back to my office and began to read it while I ate lunch, hoping for inspiration.

I was not disappointed. In fact, you might say that my prayers were answered in a very immediate and compelling way by the following story, which I found in its pages:

*... A youngster...had asked a spontaneous question during a church service... The child was standing on the chancel steps with other boys and girls who had come forward for the children's sermon. Before [the preacher] had spoken her first words to them, the boy asked, "What does the voice of God sound like?"*

*...The little boy's question had preempted the [prepared] children's sermon...All were waiting to see how their pastor would answer the question, "What does the voice of God sound like?"*

*...She began slowly, saying "The voice of God sounds like..." and drew the words out as long as she could while she prayed desperately that God would speak and give her an answer.*

*She started once again: "The voice of God sounds like ... like your best friend, like someone you trust, someone you can*

*really talk things over with. The voice of God sounds like your mother or your father or your favorite baby sitter when they comfort you because you're having a bad dream in the night. You hear them next to your bed, calling: "Everything's all right. Everything's all right. I'm right here beside you." [1](#)*

And then she began telling the story of the calling of Samuel, which we have just heard read, in which the boy mistakes the voice of God for that of his teacher, Eli. She concluded "So sometimes it's not easy to recognize the voice of God on our own. We often need our friends to help us."

What does the voice of God sound like?

The preacher in our story later reflected that the voice of God does not always sound like our best friend. Sometimes, she said, "The voice of God also sounds like the stranger, the alien, the one who cries out in hurt and anger."

Sometimes the voice of God sounds like a judge, condemning those who oppress or take advantage those less powerful, less fortunate, those closer to the margins of society. The story of the calling of Samuel continues,

*Then the Holy One said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will ring in the ears of all who hear it. When that day comes I shall make good every word from beginning to end that I have spoken against Eli and his family. You are to tell him that my judgment on his house will stand forever because he knew of his sons' blasphemies against God and did not restrain them. Therefore I have sworn to the family of Eli that their abuse of sacrifices and offerings will never be expiated." [2](#)*

This is a difficult text for those of us who want God to be loving, kind, and good. We cringe at the idea of a God who says of anyone "their abuse...will never be expiated." What about forgiveness? we cry. What about compassion?

But what were the sons of Eli guilty of? What, exactly, was

God unwilling to forgive? It seems to me that God was holding them to account precisely for their lack of repentance. The sons of Eli, we are told in the previous chapter, were the worst sort of scoundrels. Entrusted with the priesthood, arguably the most important and powerful role in the community in this time before the establishment of the monarchy, they abused their power, taking more than their share of the sacrifices of the people, and enforcing their greed with physical force. The sons of Eli had no respect, either for God or for the people of God. And Eli was complicit in their evil ways, because he saw and said nothing.

When I think of it this way, I realize that God's love for the ordinary folks, for the poor and the oppressed, necessitates God's anger against those who oppress them. It is not that God is a "God of wrath," but it is that God cares about justice, about fairness, about those who are overlooked and trampled upon by the people in power. When God says, "their abuse...will never be expiated," it is a promise that God will always be with those who are harmed by the sons of Eli and their successors. It is the flip side of Jesus speaking in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth."

In this story, God does not speak to Eli or to his sons, although they are the priests, the official mediators of the Presence. Rather, God speaks to the boy Samuel, one who, because he does not belong to the right family, can never be a priest, but has been dedicated for a life of service to the priesthood. The names here may be symbolic: Eli, in Hebrew pronounced *Ay-li*, is connected to the verb "to sacrifice." Samuel, in Hebrew *Shmu-el*, means "the one who listens to God." Samuel, the son of Hannah – who had prayed so earnestly for a child – came to Shiloh because God heard the voice of his mother. He spent the rest of his life listening to the voice of God, and telling the people what he heard.

What does the Voice of God sound like?

Yesterday morning, I rode around the city with about twenty-five other Seekers, looking at buildings that we might consider making Seekers new home. Each of them had potential, each of them had challenges. None of them was perfect.

As we scattered and regrouped in each location, I listened to the kinds of things people were saying. Some questions were about the size or layout of the buildings. How could we arrange the worship space? Is it too big or too small for who we are now? Where would we have Sunday school? Is the ceiling too low, or too high? What about a kitchen and a dining room? Others were concerned with the condition of the building. Is it structurally sound? Is the wiring good? What kind of furnace does it have? There were thoughts about the neighborhood. How far is it to the Metro? Is there parking? Would our children and we be safe there? And, not least, there were questions about money. What is the asking price? Can we afford it? Could we rent out some of the space, to help pay for it? Do we want to be landlords?

As we asked all these questions, it seemed that we are not clear, yet, where we as a community are called, who we are called to become, what we are called to do. I wondered how we would hear God's voice.

What does the Voice of God sound like?

Last night, I heard explosions in the distance. At first, I wondered what it was. Then, I remembered that I had read about "the biggest fireworks display ever in Washington," to be held in honor of the Presidential Inauguration. The fireworks, the parade, the balls and parties, and the Inauguration itself is about power. It is about the power of law, the power of money, the power of armies. It is about winning the power to govern. But it is also about something else: it is about the power of ideals over the imagination of a people.

Four years ago, I went down to Pennsylvania Avenue to watch

the Inaugural parade. I stood for a longtime in the cold among all the others, hoping to get a glimpse of President Clinton. When I saw his tall form less than half a block away, I was as excited as those kids in old film clips, screaming over Elvis or the Beatles were. I was surprised by my own reaction, not realizing how much – despite all my grown-up, disillusioned, cynicism– I still was affected by the power of the Presidency. More than anything, I wanted the new President to be one that America could be proud of, to help America live up to its best self.

The inaugural festivities in official Washington will largely overshadow this year, the celebration honoring Martin Luther King. But what Dr. King did, above all, was to hold up to this nation the ideals of its own founding words, which the President and Congress swear to defend. His life and death hold us accountable to the ideals of freedom, of equality, of dignity for all people, not just for the favored few. When he said “I have a dream,” he was challenging America to live up to the best of its heritage, to make of patriotism more than fireworks and flag waving, more than parades and empty promises.

What does the Voice of God sound like?

This week, after thirty years of occupation, and several tense weeks of negotiation, Israeli troops pulled out of most of Hebron. The relationship between Israelis and Palestinians is like the worst kind of family quarrel, one that has been going on for over five thousand years. Each side has piled up wrong upon wrong, violence upon violence. Each side claims a right to the land, to a homeland, to self-determination. Each side claims to possess the will of God.

But, little by little, inch by inch, violence is giving way to peace. Implacable enemies shake hands, new boundaries are drawn, and new agreements are signed. Each side gives up some of its of anger and fear.

What does the Voice of God sound like?

There are many stories in the Scriptures in which a person is said to have heard the voice of God. Abraham heard God tell him to leave the land of his ancestors, and go to a land that God would show him. Later, he heard God command him to sacrifice his son Isaac, but an angel stayed his hand. Hagar heard God tell her that her son, Ishmael, was also heir to the promise, that he, like Isaac, would be the ancestor of a great nation. Moses heard the voice of God calling out of a burning bush. In the story of Elijah, we are told that the voice of God was not in the storm or the earthquake or the fire, but in the resounding silence.

We at Seekers value silence. Those of us who are core members, and many who are not, go to Wellspring at least once a year, for a weekend of communal silence. We eat and drink and pray together. We walk the land, listen to the wind and the rain and the call of the geese and the hoof beats of the deer and the crackling of the fire in the hearth and the small noises of the building in the night. Here, each Sunday, we settle into the silence after the Children's Word. We hear one another's confessions, thanksgivings, and prayers for those in need. We hear each other breathe and cough and weep. We hear the traffic in the street, the birdsong and the sirens.

And sometimes, in the depth of the silence, or in the question of a child, we know what the voice of God sounds like.

---

1) Thomas H. Troeger, *The Parable of Ten Preachers* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992], pp. 70ff.

2) 1 Samuel 3:11-14 (Revised English Bible)